

PRIVATE EVENT

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PRIVATE EVENT

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology (Behavior Analysis, Behaviorism, Philosophy of Mind)

1. Core Definition

A private event refers to any stimulus, response, or consequence that is experienced solely by the individual organism and is inaccessible to direct observation by others. These events occur "within the skin" but are conceptualized as physical, biological phenomena rather than non-physical mental entities, adhering to a naturalistic worldview.

The defining characteristic of a **private event** is its singularity of observation. While neurological activity can be publicly measured using technology (e.g., fMRI), the subjective experience itself--the feeling of a headache or the content of a thought--remains known only to the person experiencing it. This places the private event firmly within the realm of subjective experience, posing unique challenges for scientific analysis based on objective observation.

Private events are typically categorized into two types based on their function: private stimuli and private responses. Private stimuli include internal sensations (e.g., pain, proprioception, hunger), while private responses constitute covert behavior, such as thinking, imagining, or silent self-talk. In the radical behaviorist framework, both are treated as variables subject to the same functional laws of learning and conditioning that govern public behavior.

2. Philosophical Context: Privacy and Subjectivity

The analysis of private events addresses the fundamental philosophical problem of subjectivity in science. Traditional philosophical approaches often relied on dualism, positing a separation between the physical body and a non-physical mind or consciousness. The radical behaviorist approach, however, seeks to integrate subjective experiences into a monistic, physical framework.

By labeling internal experiences as **private events**, behaviorism provides a mechanism to acknowledge the undeniable existence of human subjective experience--such as feelings and thoughts--without resorting to mentalistic or non-scientific explanations. This acknowledgement differentiates radical behaviorism from earlier forms, such as methodological behaviorism, which sought to exclude internal states entirely from scientific scrutiny, viewing them as irrelevant "black boxes."

The concept serves to bridge the gap between publicly observable actions and the internal precursors or correlates of those actions. Although the event is private, it is understood to follow natural laws, meaning the internal activities of an organism are physical occurrences that could, in theory, be fully observed and measured if technology permitted direct access to the entire nervous

system.

3. Historical Development in Psychology

Prior to the establishment of modern behaviorism, early psychological schools, particularly structuralism under Wilhelm Wundt and Edward Titchener, relied heavily on introspection to study consciousness. This method involved trained participants reporting on their immediate sensations and perceptions. However, introspection proved unreliable, non-replicable, and highly prone to observer bias, leading to the early 20th-century movement away from internal states.

John B. Watson's methodological behaviorism reacted strongly against introspection, arguing that psychology must limit itself exclusively to publicly verifiable, observable behaviors. This perspective effectively banished concepts like thought and feeling from scientific inquiry for several decades, creating an incomplete picture of human behavior by ignoring the internal life of the organism.

It was B.F. Skinner, through the development of **radical behaviorism**, who formally re-introduced internal experience into the scientific analysis of behavior under the term **private event**. Skinner argued that a science of behavior must account for everything an organism does, including thinking and feeling, even if those activities are only observable by the organism itself. This crucial inclusion allowed behavior analysis to address complex human activities like verbal behavior, creativity, and self-awareness.

4. Private Events and Radical Behaviorism (B.F. Skinner)

B.F. Skinner's radical behaviorism is the primary theoretical home for the concept of the **private event**. Skinner insisted that mental life is not separate from physical behavior but is simply behavior occurring on a scale or in a location that is currently inaccessible to the public. Thus, thinking is classified as "covert verbal behavior," subject to the same principles of operant conditioning (reinforcement, extinction, punishment) as overt behavior.

Skinner famously used the "two-skin" argument to describe this integration. Behavior occurring "inside the skin" (private) and behavior occurring "outside the skin" (public) differ only in their accessibility. Both are part of the organism's overall activity, and one can influence the other. For instance, a private event (thinking about an upcoming deadline) can serve as a discriminative stimulus (SD) that prompts a public response (starting to type an essay).

Crucially, radical behaviorism avoids the trap of mentalism--the idea that thoughts or feelings initiate behavior in a non-physical, causal manner. Instead, **private events** are viewed as either collateral effects of shared environmental causes (e.g., fear and running are both caused by a dangerous stimulus) or as responses maintained by reinforcement history. The true cause of both

public and private behavior is traced back to the genetic endowment and the environmental variables (antecedents and consequences).

5. Contrast with Methodological Behaviorism

The distinction between radical and methodological behaviorism hinges fundamentally on the treatment of **private events**. Methodological behaviorists treat the organism as a stimulus-response machine, focusing only on the input (environment) and the output (public behavior), effectively disregarding the internal activity as scientifically irrelevant or unknowable.

Radical behaviorism, conversely, considers private events vital to a comprehensive analysis. By including internal activities, radical behaviorism provides a functional account for phenomena like self-control, covert problem-solving, and emotional experience. If an organism's behavior is influenced by its own internal stimuli (e.g., pain, anxiety), excluding these factors leads to predictive and explanatory failures.

The consequences of this theoretical split are profound in practice. Methodological approaches struggle to analyze highly complex human language--especially when people describe their feelings or internal states--because they lack a mechanism to connect the verbal report (public behavior) back to the internal stimulus (private event) that occasioned it. Radical behaviorism provides this mechanism by analyzing how the verbal community teaches the individual to label their private experiences based on public, collateral criteria.

6. Operationalization and Measurement Challenges

Despite their theoretical inclusion, **private events** present immense challenges regarding operational definition and measurement. Since direct, shared observation is impossible, the scientific analysis of private events must rely on indirect methods, which inherently introduce ambiguity and potential inaccuracy.

The primary method for accessing private events is the individual's self-report (verbal behavior). However, verbal descriptions of internal states are learned and maintained by the social environment, which can only reinforce the description based on publicly accessible, collateral events. For example, a child learns to say "I am sad" when others observe crying or frowning. If the private experience does not coincide perfectly with the public behavior used for training, the verbal report can be functionally inaccurate.

To overcome these limitations, researchers utilize technologies to convert private physiological correlates into public data. Techniques include biofeedback, polygraphs, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to track brain activity associated with specific thoughts, and ecological momentary assessment (EMA), where participants record their internal states immediately upon

experiencing them. While these tools measure the biological processes underlying the event, they remain proxies and do not capture the subjective experience itself.

7. Examples and Classification of Private Events

Private events are organized based on the nature of the internal activity or sensation they represent. Understanding these classifications is essential for conducting a functional analysis of behavior, especially in clinical contexts.

The three main categories are:

Covert Behavior: These are internal responses that parallel overt actions but occur at a level inaccessible to others. Examples include silent problem-solving, rehearsing a speech in one's head, or internal self-talk. These covert responses can function as discriminative stimuli for subsequent public behavior.

Interoceptive Stimuli: These are sensations arising from the internal organs and physiological systems of the body, relating to internal homeostasis and biology. Examples include the feeling of a racing heart (anxiety), hunger pangs, nausea, dizziness, or localized pain (e.g., a headache). These stimuli often serve as powerful motivating operations or SDs for public responses.

Proprioceptive Stimuli: These are sensations related to the position, movement, and tension of the muscles, joints, and tendons. Proprioceptive feedback is critical for coordinated movement and body awareness. While often unconscious, specific proprioceptive stimuli can function as private events, such as the subtle muscle tension experienced just before an athlete initiates a movement.

A classic example provided in the source content illustrates covert behavior: "Julia had a **private event** when she spent the day daydreaming." Daydreaming is covert behavior--an internal response chain of imagining and thinking--that is functionally significant but only observable by Julia.

8. Significance in Clinical and Cognitive Science

The inclusion of **private events** has been transformative for applied behavior analysis and clinical psychology, particularly within third-wave behavior therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT).

In clinical settings, maladaptive private events (e.g., persistent self-critical thoughts, intense anxiety) are often the target of intervention. Instead of viewing these events as uncontrollable mental disorders, ACT treats them as functional responses that require acceptance rather than struggle. The significance lies in teaching the client to change their relationship with their thoughts and feelings, recognizing them as private events that do not necessarily dictate public action (a process called cognitive defusion).

In cognitive science, while the terminology differs (focusing on constructs like working memory, representations, and schema), the importance of internal processing aligns with the behaviorist recognition of private events. Cognitive models attempt to describe the mechanisms and structure of these internal activities, whereas behavior analysis focuses on the functional relationship between the internal activity and the environment that shapes and maintains it. Both fields acknowledge that a complete account of human performance requires addressing these internal phenomena.

9. Debates and Criticisms

Despite the utility of the concept, the integration of **private events** into a scientific framework continues to generate debate, especially from non-behavioral psychologists and philosophers of mind.

A central criticism revolves around the problem of circularity. Critics argue that when a behavior analyst states that a public response is caused by a private event (e.g., "He fled the room because he felt fear"), they risk creating an explanatory fiction. The private event itself is often simply a label for the internal correlate of the behavior, derived from the same environmental variables that caused the public behavior. The challenge is ensuring the private event is identified as a functional antecedent rather than a redundant mentalistic label.

Furthermore, philosophers raise the "hard problem of consciousness"--the question of why subjective experience feels the way it does (qualia). Critics argue that while radical behaviorism successfully sidesteps dualism by defining private events as physical behavior, it ultimately fails to address the phenomenal aspect of consciousness, merely relabeling the problem without solving the question of subjective 'feeling.'

Finally, the operational reliability remains a persistent issue. The reliance on verbal self-report means that the data describing the crucial link between the environment, the private event, and public behavior is inherently prone to distortion, memory error, or social desirability bias, challenging the rigorous requirements of empirical science.

Further Reading

Skinner on Private Events: Defining Internal Stimuli and Responses (B.F. Skinner Foundation or related academic resource)

Radical Behaviorism (Wikipedia or authoritative philosophy encyclopedia)

Methodological Behaviorism and the Black Box Problem (Academic source on behaviorism history)

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Private Experience (Authoritative clinical resource)